# Sparing the Article

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"The article," according to Jespersen, "is used more sparingly in English than in many other languages" (Jespersen 1933: 163). He devotes several pages of his Essentials of English Grammar to instances where the definite article is not used. The same is true of Thomson and Martinet (1960). Those instances include, for example, "fixed" expressions such as at sea, in prison, and by car, proper names such as Egypt, Wembley Stadium, and British Telecom, and the omission of the article before such words as church and market. Such cases restrict the generality of the rule that an article (the, a, or one of its commutants such as no, any, or the "genitive 's construction") must precede a singular count noun. One should be aware, however, that English is, if anything, becoming even more "sparing" in its use of the definite article.

There appear to be a number of reasons for the decreasing use of the definite article, some of which are continuations of already existing tendencies.

## Redundancy

There is a tendency in all languages to omit redundant elements wherever this does not impair communicational efficiency (see Martinet 1962, chapter 5). An example is the long-established tendency to omit the redundant article in predicative uses of the comparative and superlative, especially in speech (Who is faster, John or Fred? Of all the boys, John is strongest, etc., rather than the bookish the faster, the strongest). As only one individual can be meant in such cases, the definite article redundantly specifies that one particular individual is meant. Recent examples from the press include that line is most profitable of all, his solution is easiest, etc.

There are several other cases where the definite article is redundant and increasingly omitted. A number of place names have recently lost the definite article that once preceded them (for various reasons). They include Sudan, Yemen, Ukraine, and Lebanon. These place names are now treated as proper names, such as England or Egypt. Another instance is the uncertainty, which has long existed, over the use of the article (or its omission) with verbal nouns or abstract nouns which are determined by a prepositional phrase or other specifying expression ([the] singing of the National Anthem, [the] production of coffee). The definite article appears to be redundant once the noun is specified further, and this may explain the increasing tendency to omit the article in that position or to regard its inclusion as somewhat pedantic. A related case is the omission of the definite article in such expressions as he is captain of the team/leader of the opposition, etc. (which have existed sporadically for a long time), where the definite article, if included, would be informationally redundant.

In British English, we find expressions such as he plays football but he plays the violin. Although many native speakers of American English adopt the same usage, others do not use the article in such expressions as he plays flute, she is learning piano, etc. Similarly, in American

English we often find June first, etc., as opposed to June the first. In radio broadcasts, we occasionally find the definite article disappearing from those positions in British English also.

## Proper Names

Another reason for the restriction in the use of the definite article is the increasing tendency to treat complex noun phrases used as names as proper names. This is very clear in the case of place names, when we find expressions such as United States has proposed . . . , England are playing West Indies, The OAU named Ivory Coast as the next venue . . . and A government minister made a visit to Western Isles today . . . (for the expected the United States, the West Indies, the Ivory Coast, and the Western Isles). The place names are being treated as proper names, like other place names, rather than as noun phrases including a definite article which are used as names. The same phenomenon is found with the names of organizations (He works for International Labour Organisation, World Wildlife Fund has announced . . .), companies (Distiller's Company has said . . . ), ships (Star of the Orient sailed last week . . .), regiments (Green Howards are on a tour of Germany . . .) and legal acts (Anti-terrorism Act states . . .). A more conservative form of English would retain the definite article in all those contexts treating the names as noun phrases. Other examples from the press include at United Nations, in European Community, Protests against Community Charge have continued . . . , etc.

## Other Cases

Another case of a change of grammatical function that has affected the use of the definite article is the decline of apposition and the corresponding rise of the qualifying expression. Thus, we find Wimbledon champion Michael Stich, Mr. Bush and Russian counterpart Mr. Yeltsin, Fred Jones and sister Betty, etc., rather than the Wimbledon champion, Michael Stich and his counterpart, Mr. Yeltsin, etc. Such qualifying expressions are developments of the type presented by old King Cole, young Mr. Smith, unreliable Sergeant Troy, etc., in which no article is required, whereas an article is required in the standard form of (rather bookish) apposition.

Articles have also been disappearing from an increasing number of set phrases. We find, for example, in rush hour, in stable condition, according to contract and under terms of agreement, where one might expect in the rush hour, in a stable condition, according to the contract, and under the terms of the agreement. In American English one hears if worst comes to worst for the standard British if the worst comes to the worst.1 Similarly, a number of nouns have joined the group that includes church and market, which occur without an article.2 Government and management are in this class, as in We are holding talks with Government and Management has decided, etc. This seems to be true at least sporadically for such words as hope, fear, step, danger, and chance in Best hope is . . . , Next step should be . . . , Worst fear is . . . , Clear danger is . . . , and Biggest chance will come . . . , etc. (see, for example, U.S. News and World Report).

Weatherman's English is especially hard on the definite article. We regularly hear Weather today-dry but cloudy, Wind will be. . . . , Temperature-not above. . . . The omission of the definite article and other parts of speech is in this case clearly related to the listing of points (in

tables, charts, etc.) where “grammatical” words are omitted. These omissions remain when the text is spoken.

## Influence of the Media

Most of the examples quoted above come from the media (many of them from the linguistically conservative weekly, The Economist), although the reader will be aware of such examples from his own experience. It is interesting to note that the media-which are so often associated with standardisation and stability in the linguistic system-should be in this case at the forefront of linguistic change and the evidence for it. Furthermore, it should be clear that the changes in the use of the articles referred to must involve corresponding modifications in the teaching of this area of grammar and especially in the teaching of written English.

## References

Jespersen, O. 1933. Essentials of English grammar. London: Allen and Unwin.

Martinet, A. 1962. A functional view of language. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Thomson, A. and A. Martinet. 1960. A practical English grammar. Oxford: Oxford University Press.